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Getting the Big Picture for the CIA

In the secret world of the CIA and other intelligence agencies, star performers can't get the public acclaim that's heaped on heroes in other lines of work. About the best they can hope for is recognition by their professional colleagues—and competitors.

Sometimes, though, the passage of time makes it possible to tell the exploits of these unsung undercover heroes. That's the case with Arthur Lundahl, the founder, innovator and for many years general factotum of the CIA's National Photo Interpretation Center.

Lundahl, now retired at 67, was one of the key professionals responsible for the CIA's stunning intelligence success in the Cuban missile crisis 20 years ago, as well as other agency coups that still can't be made public.

Lundahl was trained as a photo interpreter, or PI, as they refer to themselves, in the Navy during World War II. His wartime job was to pore over aerial photos to discern bombing targets and the results of the air raids. The Navy kept him on after the war to organize a photo-interpretation center.

In 1953, the CIA knocked on his door and asked him to set up a similar center for them. In an interview with my associate, Dale Van Atta, Lundahl recalled telling the CIA recruiters, "I don't know anything about you guys. If you're going to parachute me into Salerno or somewhere, forget it. I'm a scientist."

But Lundahl accepted the challenge and set to work for the spy agency, though officially still working for the Navy.

From a 25-man staff housed in "sort of a large broom closet," Lundahl's operation soon grew to 150 persons in a suite of offices near downtown Washington. Eventually, it was to reach more than 1,000, with an entire building at a naval facility.

"I bought the first computer the CIA ever had," Lundahl recalled—adding that it had to come from Sweden. In 1954, the high-flying U2 planes changed the course of photo interpretation, to say nothing of the knowledge gained on the Soviet Union.

President Eisenhower "loved reconnaissance," Lundahl recalled, and was particularly fascinated with the CIA's huge photo enlargements—"as big as your couch, 40 by 60 inches

[in which] you could see the guys walking around down there and all the small details."

The U2 operation established a new era of spying. It also required imagination, ingenuity and a lot of hard work by the PIs, as they squinted at the shapes and shadows on the photo blowups, trying to figure out which ones were important.

After Francis Gary Powers' U2 was shot down over the Soviet Union in 1960, the National Security Council ordered that a centralized photo interpretation center be set up for use by all the intelligence agencies. After the usual bureaucratic bickering, the CIA got the job, with Lundahl as boss.

Lundahl considers the Cuban missile crisis the apex of the center's work, establishing its importance once and for all. When he and his PIs first reported what the Russians were doing in Cuba to the CIA director, Lundahl was told to set up a briefing for President Kennedy. He took his photos to the White House.

"I had to interpret them for him," Lundahl said. "It's always necessary, because the layman isn't used to looking at things in the vertical. When you look down on a map, that's quite

different from looking at things horizontally."

After studying the photos of missiles lying on the ground, Kennedy asked Lundahl, "Are you sure about this?" Lundahl assured him he was as sure as a PI could be. It was only later that Lundahl learned, to his shock, that the president hadn't been able to spot the missiles in the photos; he was relying totally on Lundahl's judgment.

"Kennedy had a little problem understanding the difference between occupied and unoccupied positions," Lundahl recalled. "In missile-ery, you can survey a position, see how it's equipped logistically and see what's nearby and no missile is there. But when the whistle blows, they can wheel it in . . . ready to go."

Some of the photos obtained by low-flying aircraft were startling in their detail—even capturing open-topped Cuban military latrines in use.

"I couldn't resist," Lundahl recalls. "I showed them to Kennedy and talked to him about occupied and unoccupied positions." The president got such a kick out of one that he asked for his own enlargement of the photo, which he would show to visiting dignitaries.

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